Observant Masonry

Reviving the Vision of Freemasonry's Founders

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Introduction

In Masonic lodges across the United States today, there is a growing movement to return to a more original vision of Freemasonry's speculative founders in the early 18th century Enlightenment period. This renewed interest in the core philosophical principles and practices that inspired the establishment of the first Grand Lodge in London in 1717 is known as observant Masonry.

In general, Observant Masonry calls for diligence in ritual, a deeper pursuit of esoteric knowledge, and elevating the overall experience of being a Freemason. It is an attentive approach that seeks to recapture the transformative environment Enlightenment-era Masons created in their lodges. This article will examine the historical origins and evolution of Observant Masonry as a concept, its defining characteristics, and its embodiment in our lodge: Robert Burns Lodge No.59 in Las Vegas, Nevada.

The Roots of Observant Masonry

To understand Observant Masonry, one must first understand the philosophical and cultural currents that gave rise to speculative Freemasonry itself three centuries ago. The late 1600s and early 1700s was a period of tremendous advancement in ideas about humanity, natural science, governance, and spirituality. Referred to as the Enlightenment or Age of Reason, this era exalted the powers of logic, empiricism, and progressive virtue to improve society.

Secret societies and salons were vital to cultivating and spreading Enlightenment values. They provided spaces where men could freely exchange radical ideas and experiment with reforms without scrutiny or censorship from church and state authorities. Over time, accepted wisdom was questioned, hierarchies challenged, and new visions of humanity arose.

It was in this fertile social soil that Freemasonry took root and grew. Inspired by the Enlightenment search for meaning and self-improvement, groups of freethinking men began forming lodges to socialize and reflect on important principles. They drew upon

stonemasons' traditional rites and symbols to create initiatic journeys imparting moral instruction.

Anderson's Constitutions, the founding document of the Premier Grand Lodge of England published in 1723, clearly reflects Enlightenment thought. It asserts human reason over dogma, individual dignity, religious tolerance, social virtue, wisdom, and science as central tenets of the fraternity. Masonry was conceived as a method to reach one's highest intellectual and moral potential. The lodge space itself was designed to be a collective laboratory for this transformative work.

Observant Masonry is thus an effort to return to this original "laboratory" vision of the Craft. It is about recapturing the experiential and intellectual spirit that motivated Enlightenment Masons in their lodges. Over subsequent generations, as Freemasonry spread globally, many lodges drifted away from self-improvement towards sociability alone. But Observant Masons believe by closely studying and practicing what early Masons thought, wrote, and did in their lodges, one can still experience the same engaged, elevating environment that so inspired them.

Defining Principles of Observant Masonry

Observant Masonry is a modern term for a renewed focus on the core tenets and practices that defined speculative Freemasonry at its birth. There is no single model, but most Observant Lodges share a set of common principles:

- Selectiveness in petitioners.
- Emphasis on mentorship and mastery of knowledge.
- Emphasis on the journey of the Neophyte.
- High standards of ritual and proficiency.
- Merit-based officer progression.
- Solemnity and decorum in meetings.
- Quality festive boards for fellowship.
- Archives and education to deepen understanding.
- Focus on self-improvement and seeking enlightenment.
- Qualitative literature for the neophytes, for each degree.
- Longer time between every degree for a full experience and journey.

The specifics of how these principles are applied vary between lodges. But the philosophical intent behind them – to provide the most immersive, transformative Masonic experience possible – remains constant.

Selective petitioning ensures that new Masons are prepared for the obligations they will undertake and integrates seamlessly. Close mentorship gives Candidates personal guidance in absorbing knowledge at their own pace. Ritual mastery creates moving ceremonial work. Merit-based officers allow Brothers to develop leadership skills before exercising them. Attention to decorum, dining, and self-reflection evokes the atmosphere of sanctity and reverence that Masonry deserves. Masonic education feeds the endless pursuit of discovery and growth.

In this way, Observant Lodges strive to optimize every element of the Masonic path to provide Brethren with profound insight into Masonic light. It revives the original promise of Freemasonry as a qualitative and lengthy initiatic journey of self-betterment through esoteric wisdom.

A Renewed Movement

While observant Masonry has deep historical roots, it did not gain widespread recognition as a defined movement until the early 2000s. This renewed interest was sparked by several cultural factors:

- Mainstream Masonry suffering an identity crisis and long decline in membership.
- New academic research providing insights into Masonic history.
- Brothers seeking a more rigorous, engaged Masonic experience.
- Need to improve public understanding of Masonry by showcasing its true nature.
- A new generation of masons seeking more out of masonry that a social club.
- The advent of the internet giving interested prospects, better access to information.

By the 1990s, Masonic lodges in many jurisdictions had become large, bureaucratic institutions focused mostly on philanthropy, with meetings reduced to mere business proceedings. This “corporatization” of the fraternity diluted its initiatic heart. Many Masons felt spiritually disconnected from the Craft. Membership decreased as Masonry lost relevance.

Meanwhile, a new wave of Masonic scholarship provided perspective on how much Freemasonry had deviated from its original form. Academics like Margaret Jacobii, Jan

Snoekii and Andreas Önnerforsiii undertook extensive studies of Masonic history and rituals. Their work demonstrated the immense philosophical depth of early Masonry overlooked in modern lodges.

At the same time, a vanguard of Masons began questioning why their experience seemed so superficial compared to the transformative descriptions they read in old monitors and lectures. These three factors – decline, research and yearning – created the impetus for the Observant Masonry movement. It is driven by Masons who want to understand the fraternity's roots and recreate the sense of magic, wonder and intellectual stimulation that originally attracted Enlightenment thinkers.

There is also an external motivation. In a media age, reclaiming Masonry's essence of moral instruction is critical to its public image. When outsiders encounter intellectually vibrant Observant Lodges instead of just social clubs, it improves their understanding of what the Craft truly represents.

For all these reasons, Observant Masonry gained increasing appeal after 2000 as the remedy to revive Freemasonry's original ethos. Now let us examine it in action through our Lodge approach.

Robert Burns Lodge No.59 – The first observant Lodge in Nevada.

Robert Burns Lodge No.59, constituted in 2022, is a remarkable example of the observant Masonry model. The Lodge pursues excellence and universality in every facet of its work to provide an unrivaled initiatic experience that captivates the Masons of our community.

Las Vegas is an unusual city for a highly traditional Lodge to take root. Famous for entertainment excess, it seems an unlikely home for esoteric reflection. But it is precisely this surreal "city of illusion" that makes the timeless sanctuary Robert Burns Lodge provides so special. Below its casino façade of sensationalism, Las Vegas contains a thriving community of professionals, families and thinkers seeking meaningful lives.

Robert Burns Lodge fills this need in Las Vegas Masonry. It demonstrates that the observant approach succeeds not by isolating members from society, but by giving them a stable anchor of wisdom to navigate daily life. The Lodge's brothers come from diverse faiths, ethnicities and careers, representing the community. They are united by a fervent belief that through mastering Masonic teachings and rousing intellectual discourse, they can reach higher versions of themselves as men and citizens.

Constant Growth

In its first two years of existence, Robert Burns Lodge expanded significantly while refining its Observant model:

- Careful screening of new applicants and meticulous mentorship of new Entered Apprentices, only admitting a small portion of new applicants.
- Incorporating Chamber of Reflection and use of music and symbolism.
- Strict dress code and traditions to maintain dignity and decorum.
- Lavish festive boards after meetings for bonding and intellectual discourse.
- Robust Masonic education integrated into all meetings with paper presentation by their own members an a dedicated book offered to the Neophyte per degrees.
- Annual observance of Festivals honoring different cultures and masonic traditions.
- Establishing scholarships, awards and mentor programs to spread Masonic education.

This dynamic approach succeeds in providing a profoundly moving initiatic experience that fuels dedication. Robert Burns Lodge exemplifies observant Masonry through ten core practices:

1. **Selective petition process** – Petitioners undergo extensive screening including detailed application, thorough investigation, interviews and unanimous voting. This ensures candidates are prepared for obligations.
2. **Immersive mentorship** – Masonic mentors provide one-on-one tutelage to Entered Apprentices over many months, with full proficiency required before advancement. This invests candidates in Masonry.
3. **Ritual mastery** – Lodge members rehearse ritual extensively between degrees to perfect ceremonial work and floor movements for most powerful delivery.
4. **Meritocratic officers** – Brothers ascend to leadership positions based on skill, not just seniority. This fosters active, qualified officers best suited to govern.
5. **Festive boards** – Every meeting concludes with a fine dining communal meal inviting philosophical debate, strengthening fraternal bonds.
6. **Solemn decorum** – Strict dress code, vigilance against profanity and attention to solemnity creates a dignified atmosphere befitting Masonry's import.

7. **Living heritage** – Programs like adoption of Restoration Lodge in England link past and future, underscoring Masonry's historic continuity.
8. **Initiatic experience** – Unique elements like Chamber of Reflection and other, restore a sense of mystery and self-reflection to degrees.
9. **Universality** – Robert Burns Celebration, celebrating Masonry's global nature and bringing families and other Lodges together.
10. **Masonic education** – Presentations on symbolism, ethics and esoteric concepts at every meeting feed members' hunger for knowledge and progress.

This potent combination fosters precisely the kind of transformative environment Enlightenment Masons sought to design in their lodges. Robert Burns Lodge is lymphatic to the global observant Masonry movement because it demonstrates these founding principles adapted seamlessly to the 21st century.

Impact on Members

The ultimate proof of Robert Burns Lodge's observant model is its impact on members. Through exhaustive interviews with brothers, certain themes emerged:

- A deeply moving, cathartic initiatic journey revealing Masonry's esoteric brilliance.
- Gaining a new community of friends who influence them to improve intellectually, spiritually and civically.
- Insight into Masonry's application to living a wise, purposeful, integrated life.
- A regular refuge of tranquility and self-reflection apart from life's chaos, keeping priorities on track.
- Unexpected mysteries and discoveries that continually unfold even after reaching Mastery.
- A sense of connection to past and future generations of Masons across cultures.

These sentiments express exactly the kind of perspective-altering enlightenment that speculative Freemasonry was designed to induce. The Lodge provides a laboratory for self-actualization. This profoundly fulfilling craftsmanship keeps dedicated brothers returning for more light. Through tireless work, Robert Burns Lodge N.59 has hopefully contributed to the elevation the Masonic experience in Las Vegas to inspirational new heights.

Conclusion

Observant Masonry is a contemporary term for a timeless set of principles: committing to the foundational Masonic mission of self-improvement through mastering ritual, expanding mind, and strengthening community. It is not about dogma or inflexibility. It is about reviving the vision of those pioneering Enlightenment Masons who designed the Craft to be a life-changing journey of moral and intellectual growth.

Robert Burns Lodge No.59 proves that this observant model thrives in the 21st century. By meticulously integrating selectivity, mentorship, proficiency, meritocracy, decorum, fellowship, heritage and education into every facet of Lodge culture, it engages members deeply and fosters brotherly love. The power of Robert Burns' observant approach is that it aligns and accelerates all elements of Masonry into one cohesive arc of initiation.

This synergy propels men toward discovering their best selves and most enlightened understanding of their place in the universe. That was the original purpose of our speculative forebears in establishing Freemasonry three centuries ago, and it is the guiding light steering the Observant resurgence today.

Footnotes:

i *The Rise And Fall Of English Freemasonry* by Margaret Candee Jacob

ii *Researching Freemasonry : Where Are We ?* by J.A.M. Snoek

iii *Freemasonry: A Very Short Introduction* by Andreas Önnerfors